

Important information for private well owners

Did you know contaminants could show up in your drinking water, potentially putting your family's health at risk?

Many contaminants can't be identified by taste, color, odor or clarity. Therefore, the state Department of Health (DOH) says regular water testing is very important.

Do you know the rules and regulations associated with using your private well?

Under state law, the waters of Washington belong to the public and cannot be owned by any individual or group. Instead, the Washington Department of Ecology (Ecology) may grant individuals or groups the right to use water. Private wells are sometimes called "exempt wells" because they are exempt from the ground water permit system. State laws do establish minimum well construction standards. These laws require you to submit a *Notice of Intent to Construct a Water Well* form and the appropriate fee to Ecology at least 72-hours before construction begins.



Water testing

State law requires public water systems to routinely test for many contaminants. If you own a private well, you are responsible for testing your own water. Many times when buying or selling a home with a private well, Washington counties and lending institutions will ask you to provide water sampling results to show the water is safe to drink. At a minimum, DOH recommends annual coliform and nitrate tests. Unlike other contaminants, coliform and nitrate could affect someone's health through a single exposure. For a complete list of possible contaminants and associated health risks, visit the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's web site listed below.

Many certified labs in Washington perform these tests for \$20 to \$40 per test. Lab staff can answer questions and tell you how to collect water samples. For a list of certified labs, visit Ecology online at: <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/apps/eap/acclabs/labquery.asp>. Under "Location" select your state, city, and county. Scroll down and click on "Show results." Click on the name of the labs to see what tests they perform.

Check with your local health department to see if the lab results indicate a health concern. If so, fix the problem as soon as possible. You may need to disinfect your well, repair your water system, or use an alternative drinking water source such as bottled water.



In addition to annual testing,

Test your well water when:

- A household member is pregnant or nursing.
- A household member has an unexplained illness.
- You hear a neighbor's water is contaminated.
- You notice a change in water taste, color, odor or clarity.
- You know of a chemical or fuel spill near your well.
- You replace or repair any part of your well system.
- Your well has flooded.
- You live in an area with naturally occurring arsenic.

Exempt Private Wells

In 2005, the Attorney General's Office issued a formal opinion clarifying four types of ground water uses exempt from state water-right permitting requirements.

- **Water for livestock** – no gallon per day limit or acre restriction.
- **Water for a non-commercial lawn or garden no larger than ½ acre** – no gallon per day limit.
- **Water for a single home or groups of homes** – limited to 5,000 gallons per day.
- **Water for industrial purposes, including irrigation** – limited to 5,000 gallons per day but no acre limit.

The permit exemption allows certain users of small quantities of ground water (most commonly, single residential well owners) to construct wells and develop their water supplies without first obtaining a water right permit from Ecology. A family of four typically uses about 250 gallons a day of water use inside their home. Here are some other facts ground water users should know:

- All wells for a given project apply toward the limits of the exemption. For example, you cannot irrigate two acres by installing four wells (each serving ½ acre). If you wish to develop land and supply the commercial or domestic development with water from several wells, all the wells of the development together can not exceed the 5,000 gallon a day limit. If they do exceed the limit, you must obtain a water right from Ecology.
- Water users may apply for a water right permit from Ecology, even if their uses fall under the permit exemption.
- Although exempt ground water withdrawals don't require a water right, they are always subject to state water law. In some cases, Ecology regulates or places conditions on ground water withdrawals when they interfere with prior, "senior" water rights, including instream flows.



Unlike a state-issued water right, disagreements regarding exempt water use are a civil matter. For example, if you believe your neighbor's water use is interfering with yours, the matter may need to be settled in a civil court. Ecology does not have the legal authority to resolve such disagreements.

However, if you are aware of an unauthorized, high water use by someone without a water right, please contact the nearest Ecology office immediately at the phone number and address below. Ecology tracks these complaints and responds if necessary.

For More Information

Department of Ecology

Publications:

These and other publications are online at <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/pubs.shtm>

- *Frequently Asked Questions: Water Rights in Washington*, #96-1804-S&WR
- *The Ground Water Permit Exemption*, #F-WR-92-104
- *Well Caps: Problems and Solutions*, #96-br-098
- *Surface Seals: Problems and Solutions*, #96-br-099
- *Focus on: Well Tagging Requirements*, #98-1805-WR

Wells - licensing, construction and reporting

<http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/wells/wellhome.html>

Well logs - location, ownership, construction details, and so on

<http://apps.ecy.wa.gov/welllog>

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Ecology's Regional Offices

Northwest Regional Office
3190 160th Avenue SE
Bellevue, WA 98008-5452
(425) 649-7000

Southwest Regional Office
PO Box 47775
Olympia, WA 98504-7775
(360) 407-6300

Central Regional Office
15 W. Yakima Avenue, Suite 200
Yakima, WA 98902-3452
(509) 575-2490

Eastern Regional Office
North 4601 Monroe
Spokane, WA 99205-1295
(509) 329-3400



Department of Health

Publications:

To order these and other publications, call (800) 521-0323 (within Washington State). Outside of Washington, call (360) 236-3100 or visit the Web site at:

http://www.doh.wa.gov/ehp/dw/Our_Main_Pages/public.htm

- *Coliform Sampling Procedure* brochure, #331-225
- *Coliform Bacteria and Drinking Water* fact sheet, #331-181
- *Color, Taste and Odor Problems in Drinking Water* fact sheet, #331-286
- *Correct Completion of a Coliform Lab Slip*, #331-247
- *General Sampling Procedure* brochure, #331-219
- *Nitrate in Drinking Water* fact sheet, #331-214
- *Nitrate Sampling Procedure* brochure, #331-222
- *Treatment of Drinking Water for Emergency Use* brochure, #331-115
- *Water Sampling: What we test for and why* booklet, #331-262



U. S. Environmental Protection Agency

- For a list of drinking water contaminants, potential health effects, and sources of drinking water contamination, call the safe drinking water hotline at (800) 426-4791, or visit <http://www.epa.gov/safewater/mcl.html#mcls>
- General information for private well owners. http://www.epa.gov/ne/eco/drinkwater/private_well_owners.html

NSF International – Information on water quality and the special needs of well water users. http://www.nsf.org/consumer/drinking_water/dw_well.asp?program=WaterTre

Wellwater.org – Information on private water well systems and ground water. <http://www.wellowner.org/index.shtml>

Water Systems Council – Individual water wells and other private well-based water systems. <http://www.watersystemscouncil.org/>

The Department of Health and Department of Ecology are equal opportunity agencies. For persons with disabilities, this document is available on request in other formats. To submit a request, please call 1-800-525-0127 (TTY 1-800-833-6388). For additional copies of this publication, call 1-800-521-0323. This and other publications are available at <http://www.doh.wa.gov/ehp/dw> and <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/>